

Social media marketing management: an application to small restaurants in the US

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to use a social media management framework and strategic orientation framework to explore how small restaurants manage social media.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors content-analyzed social media activity and interviews with 14 managers of social media in small independent restaurants in the northeast region of the USA that employed fewer than 20 employees.

Findings – The results of the study show that most small restaurants can be classified as anarchic, hierarchical and conservative defenders, and that they mainly focus on promotional activities on social media. The majority use social media also to drive traffic to a restaurant and, thus, act as calculative pragmatists. Very few use social media strategically or creatively in any of the social media management stages, and very few monitor or use social media information to improve their operations.

Research limitations/implications – This study shows that the adopted theoretical framework in this study for social media management helps analyze social media operations in small restaurants, points to the strategic orientations applied in small restaurants, shows the intricacies of each stage and helps show what small restaurants do well and how they can improve. Future research may use larger samples, investigate frameworks particularly relevant to small restaurants, such as the resource-based view (RBV) framework, and may focus on creative and diverse strategic approaches toward social media management for small establishments.

Practical implications – As customers continue shifting to social media and review sites, more restaurants may want to invest in developing more creative approaches toward social media and do it in more structured, integrated and continuous ways. The study describes a process they may want to follow and specific tactics that could be implemented to use social media more strategically in all stages of social media management.

Social implications – Not only are small business establishments the backbone of the restaurant industry, but they also appeal to customers more than large chains. This study shows how these small businesses can utilize social media to attract more customers, engage them, learn about them and their competitive environment to market and improve their operations.

Originality/value – The authors focus on the supplier side of social media for restaurants, a perspective lacking in the literature, and specifically small restaurants that receive less attention in prior research. Few studies exist that explore how social media is incorporated in all stages of social media management. The study points to the unique challenges that small restaurants experience in the process of using social media for marketing, monitoring and using social media to improve their operations. The study uses a relatively large sample of qualitative interviews conducted with managers of small restaurants and a content analysis of their actual social media activity.

Keywords Online marketing, Social media, Small business, Small media management, Small restaurants

Paper type Research paper

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1. Introduction

A restaurant's success depends on how it responds to the competitive environment and may be influenced by location, speed of growth, ability to differentiate itself, resources available, planning and willingness to adapt to change (Parsa *et al.*, 2005). Small restaurants may invest less capital, spend less on promotion and face more challenges

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than their larger, chain counterparts (English, 1996). Regardless of the size, both internal and external factors may influence success. Internal factors are linked to operational strategies and personal characteristics of management and ownership and can be creative or destructive (Camillo *et al.*, 2008). External factors relate to either the general environment: legal, economic, demographic, technological, social and cultural or more specific characteristics such as competitive forces, suppliers, customers or regulatory agencies (Parsa *et al.*, 2005). External factors can be controllable or uncontrollable (Camillo *et al.*, 2008). From an internal perspective, successful restaurants have a well-defined concept for their restaurant, effectively communicate with and educate their employees, have consistent management, choose locations carefully, monitor competition to gauge their own performance, develop positive relationships with customers and the community and are flexible and willing to adapt to change (Parsa *et al.*, 2005). How well a restaurant reacts to and manages the external environment is more important to determining restaurant success than the specific external factors on their own (Parsa *et al.*, 2005).

*To stay competitive, smaller restaurants need to find a way to stand out and generate awareness in the marketplace, despite having limited resources. Social media is one option that can help achieve these goals because of its low cost and the ability for consumers to share and interact. When restaurants create content in social media, followers of the restaurant can share this content with friends, which helps to create awareness for the restaurant because of the increased exposure (Bilghian *et al.*, 2014). Restaurant customers can also share feedback on social media by posting reviews, which also helps to spread word-of-mouth and build awareness for the restaurant (Pantelidis, 2010). Restaurants can use the feedback provided on social media to build relationships by monitoring and interacting with customers on social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and TripAdvisor (DiPietro *et al.*, 2012; Hanaysha, 2016; Sanchís-Verdeguer *et al.*, 2014; Needles and Thompson, 2013; Schaupp and Bélanger, 2013). Social media contributes to building a firm's earned media, which refers to media that cannot be bought, and this earned media can increase a small business' exposure and improve its operations (Schaupp and Bélanger, 2013). Kim *et al.* (2015) suggest that social media adds to a firm's value, and restaurant managers should strive to engage and invest in social media.*

While establishing an account on social media platforms is generally free, once the account is created, decisions need to be made about how often to post, what content to post and how to handle customer posts on the page. This requires employees or managers to spend time on it. Restaurants need to be able to access customer complaints and comments to resolve any negative customer experiences and reduce the impact of negative word-of-mouth (Israeli *et al.*, 2017). While larger or chain restaurants may hire staff specifically to handle their social media accounts or hire agencies to help them with their social media, smaller more independent restaurants may not have the resources to hire staff whose primary function is to manage social media or to hire outside agencies to perform such tasks. Larger and chain owned restaurants may also have more formalized processes and resources (Camillo *et al.*, 2008). Effectively implementing social media requires the development of policies to guide employees (Culnan *et al.*, 2010). Managing the process of social media is time-consuming, and restaurant managers may not feel they have enough time to dedicate to managing social media. They may also lack the expertise that agencies can offer or lack the time or resources to obtain social media training for themselves or their employees. In addition to time and staffing constraints, smaller restaurants may be more resistant to implementing the necessary technology and have less knowledge and fewer technology skills than their larger, chain counterparts (Oronsky and Chathoth, 2007; Schaupp and Bélanger, 2013). They may also lack the number of customers of larger chain restaurants and, therefore, it may take longer to generate the volume of reviews needed to have a noticeable positive business impact (Kim *et al.*, 2016).

Given these challenges, how can managers/owners of small restaurants use social media to effectively compete in the market? An important step to effectively utilizing social media is to understand the process, as restaurant managers could potentially benefit from gaining knowledge of the entire social media management process. Literature related to social media and restaurants has often focused on its promotional aspects. However, implementing social media as a marketing strategy involves much more. To date, research on the social media marketing management process in the restaurant industry has been limited. We wanted to find a framework in the social media marketing literature that might be applicable to the restaurant industry. [Parsons and Lepkowska-White \(2018\)](#) recently developed a conceptual framework in a general marketing context that outlines the social media marketing management process, and we wondered if it may be a useful tool for restaurant managers, despite the fact that they may have limited resources available to allocate to managing social media. This framework is recently published and has not been applied in other studies to date. In this study, we apply this model to small restaurants to explore their strategic approach toward social media and investigate the way they incorporate social media in different stages of their operations.

2. Literature review

2.1 Social media marketing

When making decisions about social media implementation and developing strategies, firms should choose platforms that match their target audience, develop strategies across platforms that are aligned, assign governance responsibility within the firm, ensure that activity across all media is integrated and accessible and develop policies to manage risk ([Culnan et al., 2010](#); [Kaplan and Haenlein \(2010\)](#)). The variety of social media platforms used, the diversity of social media marketing activities, the intensity or frequency of activities and connectivity or integration of activities influence consumer perceptions of brand equity ([Pham and Gammoh, 2015](#)).

The level of customer engagement influences a firm's social media strategy and its ability to acquire, retain and terminate relationships with customers, and to effectively implement a social media strategy, firms need to empower their employees to embrace a social media culture, train employees and encourage the flow and accessibility of information ([Malthouse et al., 2013](#)). Developing social media strategy requires a firm to be cognizant of where conversations about it might be happening online, to develop strategies that are congruent with both the chosen social media platforms and the firm's goals, to identify employees who can curate content posted online and continually search for information ([Kietzmann et al., 2011](#)). Firms need to develop the ability to acquire new knowledge and to process or respond to customer comments, and achieving these goals requires firms to develop processes and procedures and determine how to report the information ([Culnan et al., 2010](#)).

2.2 Social media for hospitality/tourism firms and small businesses

Social media provides potential growth opportunities for small businesses to enhance customer relationships, improve sales and build their reputations ([Schaupp and Bélanger, 2013](#)). Many small businesses may adopt social media because they fear losing out on these opportunities ([Durkin et al., 2013](#)). They may also lack the financial resources to invest in technology and the human resources needed to actively post content or monitor information on social media platforms ([Morrison and Teixeira, 2004](#); [Syed-Ahmad and Murphy, 2010](#)). Deciding whether to implement social media is an important decision, so understanding why firms choose to implement it is essential. [Pentina et al. \(2012\)](#) found that intentions to adopt social media are affected by the social influence of experts, customers and competitors and the perceived usefulness of social media. [Sulaiman et al. \(2015\)](#)

discovered that compatibility with existing technological infrastructure, interactivity and cost-effectiveness positively influence a firm's decision to use Facebook and found that firms that use Facebook as a promotional tool reduced their advertising costs, enhanced customer relations and improved access to information for customers. [Leung et al. \(2015\)](#) found a relationship between a consumers' experience on Facebook and Twitter and their intentions to make a hotel reservation or to share on social media that suggests that a firm's social media strategy can influence a firm's performance.

While making the decision to implement social media is an important first step, firms need to realize the potential of social media and understand how it can be used in daily operations. In the hospitality industry especially, consumers often rely on the recommendations of other consumers when making decisions, so businesses need to nurture relationships with their customers by encouraging them to interact directly with the firm and by trying to control consumer conversations ([Tussyadiah et al., 2015](#)). Businesses need to decide what approach to use when using social media. [Pentina and Koh \(2012\)](#) identified three different types of social media users. Calculative pragmatists implement social media to cut costs, use tactics designed to drive traffic and build brand awareness. Cautious watchers implement social media on a trial basis, use social media as a market research tool to protect themselves and view social media as an unavoidable cost. Proactive strategists engage with all aspects of social media and view social media as an opportunity to gain competitive advantage and differentiate themselves.

In the hospitality and tourism industry, consumer opinions may directly affect real-time booking probability and, therefore, managers need to constantly monitor such information to quickly address concerns ([Nave et al., 2018](#)).

From 2007 to 2011, literature published in tourism and hospitality journals primarily focused on the role of social media in the pre-travel planning process for consumers and the role of social media on promotion, management and research for suppliers (firms) ([Leung et al., 2013](#)). Another literature review of more recent articles published in top tourism journals from 2011 to 2014 discovered that the majority of published articles focused on social media use from the consumer's perspective (travel behaviors, social media use, attitudes, engagement, satisfaction, motivation, information search), while articles from the supplier's (firm) perspective were fewer in number and addressed primarily promotion and product development concerns ([Lee et al., 2015](#)). Recent research related to restaurants represents a smaller percentage of the articles written about social media in the hospitality field ([Lu et al., 2017](#)).

2.3 Social media for restaurants

Restaurants can use social media for a variety of purposes. The most popular uses are promotions, linking or sharing news, advertising products and events, recruiting employees and making personal contact with guests ([DiPietro et al., 2012](#); [Needles and Thompson, 2013](#)). Smaller restaurants often view social media as an additional form of advertising and primarily use it to passively build awareness and encourage word-of-mouth ([Lepkowska-White, 2017](#)). Restaurants can post different types of messages from conversational to more traditional sales and marketing messages ([Kwok and Yu, 2013](#)). Social media advertising can help to build and maintain a restaurant's brand image, brand loyalty, brand equity, brand preference and brand leadership. ([Hanaysha, 2016](#)). Communication on social media should be casual and flexible, and the content may need to be adapted to the specific social media platform chosen ([Fox and Longart, 2016](#)).

Consumers use social media to obtain information about dining and to make dining choices and will also share their experiences with others through social media ([Bilghian et al., 2014](#)). Many restaurants rely on this word-of-mouth to promote their establishments, and because social media serves as a form of electronic word-of-mouth, restaurants want to use social

media (Cheng and Ho, 2015). Restaurants may use technology for customer feedback, repeat customer management, operations management and human resources management (Oronsky and Chathoth, 2007). Engaging with customers is an important aspect of successful social media, and firms should explore new and interesting ways to promote their business such as creating interesting content and promotions that resonate with consumers (Fox and Longart, 2016) or implementing pay what you want pricing strategies (Viglia *et al.*, 2019). Restaurants should strive to build their customer base by retaining customers and use social media to encourage word-of-mouth, which helps to turn customers into advocates (Sashi *et al.*, 2019). Investing in social media can improve firm value if consumers reactive positively to a firm's social media activity (Kim *et al.*, 2015). The number of reviews a restaurant receives can have a positive impact on sales, the number of guests and the size of checks, which suggests that restaurants should strive to generate buzz, encourage interactivity and be active online to encourage customers to post reviews (Kim *et al.*, 2016).

In the social media space, restaurants can initiate contact with customers, customers can initiate contact with the companies or with other customers and restaurants can monitor all activities (Gallaughner and Ransbotham, 2010). For restaurants, consumer feedback often comes in the form of an online review, so firms must learn how to manage these reviews and make decisions about when and what to post in response to online reviews (Cheng and Ho, 2015; Pantelidis, 2010). Feedback can also come in the form of posts on social media platforms, such as Facebook, so it is important for restaurants to also pay attention to these types of posts (Kwok and Yu, 2013).

Managers can use the feedback to make changes or make future menu item decisions. Managers need to be aware of this feedback to determine if a response is required, especially if it is negative. This requires mindful monitoring of a restaurant's online presence. Monitoring can help restaurants correct inaccuracies, praise employee efforts, promote offerings or remedy problems (Gallaughner and Ransbotham, 2010). Restaurants can also monitor the social media activity of their competition (Needles and Thompson, 2013). Restaurants can use alert systems such as Google Alerts to stay informed and to know when customers need responses (Needles and Thompson, 2013). Additionally, managing social media can suggest ways for a restaurant to improve or enhance their current product offerings (Pantelidis, 2010). This requires firms to have an active presence online, which involves not only posting content, but also monitoring online behavior. Small restaurants, especially, often do not take advantage of the full potential power of social media monitoring due to resource constraints (Lepkowska-White and Parsons, 2019).

Using the information generated from monitoring, firms can respond to customer comments and concerns, and how management responds can help to create brand loyalty or damage a restaurant's reputation (Pantelidis, 2010). Determining the most appropriate means to address concerns, especially after service failures, is essential for reducing the risk of negative word-of-mouth (Israeli *et al.*, 2017). Firms should strive to positively respond to consumers to improve customer satisfaction, increase the likelihood that a customer returns and to encourage consumers to generate positive word-of-mouth (Maxham, 2001). If a service failure occurs, it is important for managers to act appropriately and in a timely manner to reduce the risk of negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Israeli *et al.*, 2017). Social media can also provide restaurants with useful information to address potential problems in their operations (Pantelidis, 2010). It can provide insights on what customers like and do not like and may be useful in menu planning and designing promotional strategy. Yet, despite these benefits, many firms may not use social media to its full potential because they lack knowledge of it or access to resources (Kim *et al.*, 2016). (See Table I for a summary of the social media literature related to restaurants).

Table 1 Restaurants and social media literature

Author(s)	Journal	Research question(s)	Methodology	Main results
Bighian <i>et al.</i> (2014)	<i>International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management</i>	How do Generation Y consumers seek and share dining information, and are there differences between genders?	Survey, college students (n = 162)	Generation Y heavily uses social media. Consumer opinion leadership and susceptibility to interpersonal influence affect dining and sharing behavior
Camillo <i>et al.</i> (2008)	<i>Cornell Hospitality Quarterly</i>	What factors influence success for independent restaurant operators in the San Francisco Bay Area?	Case study, face-to-face interviews (n = 18)	Developed model of restaurant visibility. Emotional and operational factors can influence restaurant success or failure
Cheng and Ho (2015)	<i>Journal of Business Research</i>	What is the role of source credibility and argument quality when determining review usefulness?	Content analysis of online reviews (n = 983)	Reviewer's number of followers, reviewer's level of expertise image count and word count all have a significant positive effect on perceived review usefulness
DiPietro <i>et al.</i> (2012)	<i>Journal of Foodservice Business Research</i>	How is social media used, and what are management perceptions of social media and social networking in the restaurant industry?	Survey, managers of chain restaurants (n = 55)	Restaurants do not consistently use specific social media sites, use it for consistent purposes and have differing opinions about the usefulness of social media. However, social media is seen as useful for inexpensive advertising
Fox and Longart (2016)	<i>Tourism and Hospitality Management</i>	What types and styles of communication contribute to building eWOM?	In-depth interviews (n = 4)	Be flexible. Adapt content to platforms, Have content that "sticks." Incorporate mobile
Gallaughar and Ransbotham (2010)	<i>MIS Quarterly Executive</i>	How to understand and analyze customer dialog?	Conceptual and case study of Starbucks	Presents a framework for analyzing social media-based customer dialog
Hanaysha (2016)	<i>International Journal of Innovation, Management and Technology</i>	What is the effect of social media advertising on brand image, brand loyalty, brand preference, brand leadership and brand equity?	Survey, fast-food restaurant customers in Malaysia (n = 384)	Social media advertising has a significant positive effect on brand image, brand loyalty, brand preference, brand leadership and brand equity
Israeli <i>et al.</i> (2017)	<i>Journal of Hospitality Marketing and Management</i>	How do service failures in restaurants influence customer attitudes and eWOM intentions on social media?	Two studies, Study 1 – Survey, college students (n = 321) Study 2 – Survey, college students (n = 223)	Escalation of service failures leads to negative attitudes and negative eWOM. Negative eWOM becomes more aggressive as service failure escalates

(continued)

Author(s)	Journal	Research question(s)	Methodology	Main results
Kim et al. (2015)	<i>International Journal of Hospitality Management</i>	What is the relationship between a restaurant's social media activity and firm value?	Restaurant social media (RSM) index scores and Compustat quarterly financial data (n = 180) publicly traded restaurants	The results suggest there is a positive linear relationship between social media activity and firm value
Kim et al. (2016)	<i>International Journal of Hospitality Management</i>	To investigate the role of reviews and online rankings on firm performance	Case study of a regional restaurant chain (70 restaurants)	The number of reviews and restaurant ranking have a positive influence on firm performance
Kwok and Yu (2013)	<i>Cornell Hospitality Quarterly</i>	What social media messages do hospitality companies share with consumers on Facebook? What types of social media messages are endorsed by Facebook users?	Content analysis of Facebook messages (n = 982)	Photo and status messages seem more attention (or reaction) from Facebook users. Conversational messages received more attention than sales and marketing messages
Lee et al. (2015)	<i>Travel and Tourism Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally</i>	What research subjects, methods and trends do tourism journals discuss related to social media?	Literature review of 31 articles	Most studies focused on the consumer rather than the supplier perspective and studies used both qualitative and quantitative methods
Lepkowska-White (2017)	<i>Journal of Internet Commerce</i>	What are the adoption rates, challenges and uses of social media for small restaurants?	Qualitative. Interviews with restaurant owners, managers and employees (n = 20)	Restaurants use small media primarily as an advertising tool to spread word-of-mouth and face challenges trying to realize the full potential of social media
Lepkowska-White and Parsons (2019)	<i>Journal of Foodservice Business Research</i>	What are the challenges of conducting social media monitoring for small restaurants?	Qualitative interviews with restaurant owners, managers and employees (n = 18)	Small restaurants underutilize the resources associated with social media monitoring due to resource constraints
Leung et al. (2015)	<i>Journal of Tourism Marketing</i>	What have tourism and hospitality researchers done with regard to the use of social media?	Literature review of 44 articles in academic journals	Consumer-centric studies focus on the use of social media in travel planning, while supplier-centric studies focus on the use social media in promotion, management and research
Li et al. (2019)	<i>Tourism Economics</i>	What influence do social media metrics have on restaurant performance?	Content analysis of online activity for a regional restaurant chain of 70 restaurants	The effectiveness of metrics varies depending on platform. Metrics do influence performance. Provides insights on social media platform decisions and strategy development
Lu et al. (2017)	<i>Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing</i>	What trends, topics, methods, and industries are represented in travel and tourism articles related to social media?	Literature review of 105 articles	The majority of the articles focused on hotel and travel and tourism. Articles covered a wide range of topics. Content analysis and surveys were the most popular methods used

(continued)

Table I

Author(s)	Journal	Research question(s)	Methodology	Main results
Needles and Thompson (2013)	<i>Cornell Hospitality Report</i>	Why do restaurants use social networking sites to connect with current and potential customers?	Survey (n = 166) independent and chain restaurants	Restaurant use social media for promotions, linking or sharing news and making personal contact with guests
Oronsky and Chathoth (2007)	<i>Hospitality Management</i>	Explore and compare the information technology advances in chain and independent, full-service restaurants	Case study – survey (n = 4). Chain and independent full-service restaurants	Firms are less likely to incorporate new technology until it becomes a necessity for survival
Pantelidis (2010)	<i>Cornell Hospitality Quarterly</i>	What variables do consumers consider in their online reviews?	Content analysis of online consumer comments (n = 2,471)	Food, service and atmosphere are the top factors mentioned in online reviews
Sanchis <i>et al.</i> (2014)	<i>International Business and Economics Research Journal</i>	How do Spanish restaurants use social media?	Literature review	Restaurants use social media as a short-term strategy to promote their businesses
Sashi <i>et al.</i> (2019)	<i>International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management</i>	How does social media facilitate customer engagement and advocacy in quick-serve restaurants?	Content analysis of Twitter accounts of 38 companies in a three-month period	Calculative commitment influences advocacy. Loyal customers are more likely to become advocates than delighted customers

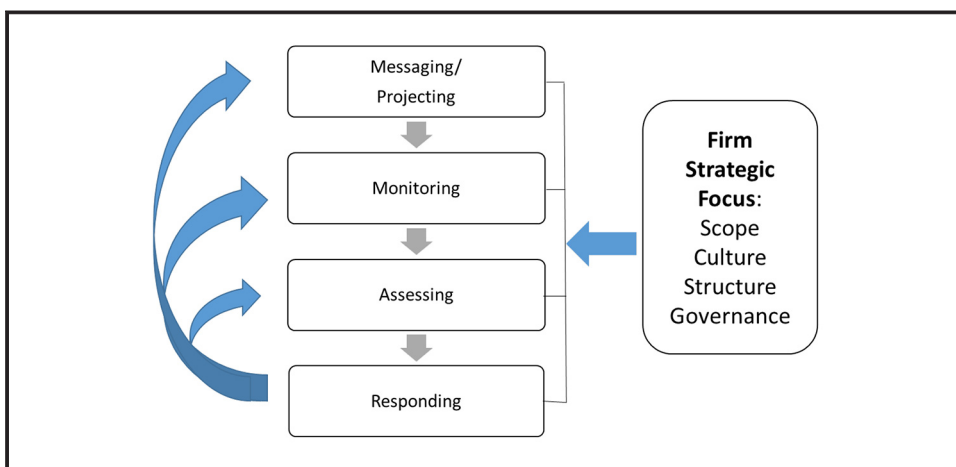
2.4 Framework

While social media is a popular topic in the general hospitality and restaurant literature, there is an abundance of literature related to use of social media as a promotional tool and the role of the consumer in determining firm performance, but studies that consider the management perspective and the process involved in implementing and using social media are rarer. Therefore, there was a need to examine the social media management process for restaurants and a need to find a framework to explain the process. The framework adopted in this study draws from a variety of literature about the process of implementing and managing social media (Parsons and Lepkowska-White, 2018; Gallagher and Ransbotham, 2010; Fox and Longart, 2016; Malthouse *et al.*, 2013; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Generally, there are four phases of the process, but how a firm implements each phase will depend on its strategic focus (see Figure 1). The first phase is messaging/projecting, and the focus here is on determining what content to present online and how often to post. The goals of this phase are to create awareness, project an image and foster interactivity. Firms can use social media as a megaphone to spread information to new or existing customers (Gallagher and Ransbotham, 2010). This information may encourage recipients to respond, which helps to personalize the customer experience, foster interactivity and build relationships with customers (Levy and Gvili, 2015).

The second phase is monitoring. It is not enough for firms to simply post information, as the social media marketing environment can change frequently (Fox and Longart, 2016). During the monitoring phase, firms can gather information about their customers and the marketplace from direct messages sent to them, such as comments on review sites and blogs or posts on Facebook or Twitter, or from indirect messages posted by consumers to other consumers to gain insights into the customer experience and understand how to respond to consumer complaints (Gallagher and Ransbotham, 2010; Israeli *et al.*, 2017). Monitoring customer opinions can help businesses understand how consumers use their products and help them to create content that is meaningful to customers (Malthouse *et al.*, 2013; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Not only do firms need to pay attention to what consumers are saying about them online, but also to monitor the competition to understand the role social media plays in influencing their competitive position (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011; Kwok and Yu, 2013).

The third phase is assessing the information obtained during the monitoring phase to determine the appropriate response. While collecting information is essential, firms need to be able to analyze it effectively to make decisions about how and when to respond when

Figure 1 The social media marketing management process



necessary as not all information needs to be acted upon. [Nave et al. \(2018\)](#) suggest that there is a need to implement decision support systems to effectively analyze customer data and ultimately gain a competitive advantage and identify opportunities in the marketplace. Information can be assessed by evaluating performance indicators such as likes, shares and followers or by content-analyzing written comments to measure sentiments or identify problems or inaccuracies ([Kietzmann et al., 2011](#); [Gallaughar and Ransbotham, 2010](#); [Schweidel and Moe, 2014](#)). During the assessment phase, decisions can be made to determine the messages that require responses, identify the tone to be used in the responses, determine where to address the messages, determine if negative messages should be removed and when to respond ([Culnan et al., 2010](#)). A cost-benefit analysis of the response strategy should also be considered during the assessment phase ([Gallaughar and Ransbotham, 2010](#)).

The fourth phase involves responding to the information generated through monitoring and subsequently assessed. Especially during a service failure related to either the product or the service, how a firm responds to the situation may influence whether the consumer spreads negative eWOM and how strongly negative the sentiments expressed about the situation are ([Israeli et al., 2017](#)). Responding to customers is an indication that the firm values the customer ([Pantelidis, 2010](#)). When responding, the responses should be conducted in a professional manner, be honest and be written in the appropriate tone ([Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010](#); [Kwok and Yu, 2013](#)). Firms need to have policies in place for how to respond to customers with a specific attention paid to how to handle service failure ([Maxham, 2001](#)). By having established procedures, employees will comprehend when and how they should respond to the customer, which may foster their creativity online ([Felix et al., 2017](#)).

How a firm adopts this four-phase process depends on its strategic focus, which involves assessing a firm's marketing scope, culture, structure and governance. Marketing scope refers to the nature of communication and firms generally can be categorized on a continuum of defenders to explorers ([Felix et al., 2017](#)). Defenders view social media as more of a one-way form of communication that is an extension of traditional advertising media, while explorers see social media as a two-way form of communications that helps to create reciprocal relationships ([Felix et al., 2017](#)). Defenders are more likely to use social media as a megaphone to project information at consumers, while explorers are more inclined to use social media as a magnet to encourage conversations and build relationships with customers ([Gallaughar and Ransbotham, 2010](#)).

Marketing culture refers to how a firm approaches social media marketing within the firm and can be categorized on another continuum between conservative or modern. Conservative approaches view social media as an extension of traditional advertising, while modern approaches view social media as a dynamic and flexible approach to marketing ([Felix et al., 2017](#)). A firm's marketing culture may influence monitoring practices such as the motivations for collecting data and how the data collected are used. More conservative cultures are likely to collect data for primarily internal use and use them only to decide when to respond, while more modern cultures collect data to more learn about customers and use them to more effectively interact with them ([Parsons and Lepkowska-White, 2018](#)). Conservative organizations are more likely to use social media as a one-way information source for the customers, while modern organizations would look for two-way interactions, seeking responses from customers and reacting to them.

Marketing structure describes where responsibility lies for handling social media within an organization. In more hierarchical structures, roles within the firm are clearly defined and social media responsibilities are clearly assigned, whereas in network structures, roles may be more flexible and less clear and performed by many. Regardless of which type of structure is used, it is important for firms to have formal systems and processes to guide the social media marketing management process ([Culnan et al., 2010](#)). It is also essential for

employees to understand who is responsible for managing the different aspects of the process (Felix *et al.*, 2017).

Marketing governance describes how policies are established and controlled within an organization (Felix *et al.*, 2017). Autocratic governance systems have specific guidelines for who can interact on social media, while anarchic governance systems do not have such guidelines (Felix *et al.*, 2017). In an autocratic system, there may be one person or department that is authorized to handle social media, while in an anarchic system, anyone in the organization can have access to social media. Establishing some rules or guidelines for responsibilities matters to employees so that they understand the process (Culnan *et al.*, 2010). Employees need to know what online behavior is acceptable and appropriate and to assess when it is appropriate and beneficial for the business to participate in social media (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011).

Overall, the social media management process is ongoing in nature and managers need to be cognizant of all phases of the process and mindfully participate in them. As information can get posted on social media at any time, managers need to be actively involved in the process on a consistent basis. Ignoring social media for even a week can be detrimental to the firm if negative issues arise during that time.

Based on the past literature that focuses on restaurants, it is clear social media is recognized as an inexpensive method to send messages and projects an image that allows restaurants to interact with their customers (DiPietro *et al.*, 2012; Hanaysha, 2016; Schaupp and Bélanger, 2013). There is less restaurant-focused literature related to monitoring, assessing and responding. Much of the existing literature also focuses on the experiences of larger independent or chain restaurants (DiPietro *et al.*, 2012; Kim *et al.*, 2015; Gallagher and Ransbotham, 2010). The resource-based view (RBV) theory posits that a firm's resources, which consist of assets and capabilities, provide the firm with benefits and can help a firm to gain a competitive advantage (Wade and Hulland, 2004). Given the scope of and resources required to implement the social media marketing management process, small restaurants may have difficulty effectively realizing the ultimate potential of social media as a marketing tool (Lepkowska-White and Parsons, 2019).

In this research, we will apply this framework to the experience of small restaurants that utilize social media. The study will examine how and to what extent the social media management model is adopted by small restaurants. Specifically, we will ask:

- what is the strategic approach (marketing scope, culture, structure and governance) toward social media management in small restaurants?; and
- how do small restaurants project information on social media, create interactivity online, monitor, assess and use the information acquired on social media?

3. Methodology

To explore the social media presence of 14 small restaurants, the study used a two-stage approach. First, we content-analyzed all posts for May and June of 2018 on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, TripAdvisor and Yelp. Second, we interviewed the managers of social media in these companies to understand what they do and why they manage social media the way they do. All restaurants came from the northeast region of the USA and employed fewer than 20 employees and operated throughout the year, but experienced highest sales during the summer months. To arrive at this sample, from a list of local small restaurants, we called every third restaurant asking for an in-person interview with a person that manages social media. Restaurants that did not use social media at all were excluded from the research, and when encountered, they were omitted and replaced with the next restaurant on the list. As an incentive, to participate in the study, we offered a mug and an access to findings of this research. In total, 25 per cent (22 restaurants) agreed to participate, but four

dropped from the final interviews and other four had no online social media presence within the analyzed period, so the resulting sample was 14.

There were several steps in the content analysis. First, for both the interviews and online posts, coding categories were developed based on a literature review and a review of posts from ten other restaurants. Coding categories are defined in [Tables II and III](#). Two coders used the established categories to code the information from the first two restaurants. The results were compared, differences discussed and after this training, coders independently coded the rest of the interviews and the rest of the post-data. Then, the coders, in person (without any software), content-analyzed all the social media posts to determine the potential objectives of the posts. The results of the content analysis were then compared between the coders and the inter-coder agreement was 92 per cent. The disagreements were resolved after the coders discussed the results.

In addition, to better understand why and how small restaurants use social media, we interviewed managers of social media in these 14 small independent restaurants. Each in-person interview was about 45 min to an hour long. With the permission of the interviewee, the interviews were recorded, transcribed and later content-analyzed. Two coders coded the responses to the questions about the objectives of social media management into the four stages of the social media management. [Table III](#) contains the definitions of the coding categories for the interviews. The two coders coded the responses independently by hand without any use of software. Upon completion, the results were discussed among the coders, and the inter-rater reliability was 96 per cent. These disagreements were resolved in a conversation between the coders.

4. Discussion

The preliminary analysis of posts shows that all restaurants posted at least once on Facebook, and all, except five, tweeted at least once on Twitter. The restaurants primarily used Facebook, as posts on this platform represented 373 of the 468 posts. Many posts had more than one objective (they fit multiple categories), and therefore, in total, there were 734 entries reached across 468 posts. Almost all posts accompanied a photo. The results of the content analysis of the posts is presented in [Table II](#) and the results of the content analysis of the interviews in [Table III](#).

4.1 Messaging/projecting

The analysis of interviews shows that while all 14 restaurants focused on amassing awareness, half treated interactivity as a social media objective and most did it at a minimal level. The majority showed features of defenders who mainly focused on reaching as many consumers as possible posting about “specials and pictures of food and any news and events that we are doing” as well as sales promotions and restaurant information. Interestingly, the highest number of posts aimed to bring customers to the restaurant. Occasionally, they posted questions, appealed to customers’ lives and responding to consumer inquiries and comments showing some features of explorers. Here, about half of the restaurants made attempts to improve their interactions with one interviewee discussing how he “jumps right into conversations” on social media.

The content analysis of the restaurants’ social media and review sites shows that the five most prominent objectives expressed across all posts were, in descending order, call to action (prompt to come to the restaurant), description of food/drinks/products, restaurant events, holidays and deals/discounts/happy hours, with call to action comprising 19.5 per cent of all categories expressed in the posts (see table). Posts about food, restaurant events, holidays and deals represented 13.4, 11.12, 9 and 7.1 per cent of all posts (see table). Alternatively, the least prolific posting type was about employment, followed by responses to customers, awards/reviews, asking customers to contacting others about the

Table II Results of content analysis of the interviews

Stage/Definition	Quotes
<p>Messaging/Projecting defined as posting that aims to create awareness, project an image and foster interactivity</p>	<p>"We use it to post specials and pictures of food and any news and events that we are doing. Yes I would say it is a good promotional tool because it is free"</p> <p>"To get the word out to the public, deliver info, update people on specials"</p> <p>"It is a good promotional tool for my business b/c it is a visual cell so the customers can see unique cake and cookies on FB and keeps the customers attention and keeps them thinking about us"</p> <p>"We post everyday on FB and our website. We post about our specials or interesting things that we see we will share them"</p> <p>"We are well established in the community and we want to reach out to the community and expand and reach a wider audience"</p> <p>"We use social media for our daily lunch specials. Also for events, wine dinners, roof top fireworks. When people eat with us we ask them to write reviews if they have a good experience. People will also take pictures of their food. If people post something about us, I know about it"</p> <p>"Also, recognizing things in the community, like recently we donated food to a gallery. It is a good promotional tool for our business because social media is how people find things out about you restaurant"</p> <p>"Primarily we use it to put the word out there of what is going on"</p> <p>"We get engagement by asking questions in the posts . . . Those types of posts create a dialogue and a live interaction as opposed to stagnant scheduled posting"</p>
<p>Monitoring defined as gathering information about customers and the marketplace</p>	<p>"It gives us the ability to reach and listen to our customers"</p> <p>"We do monitor feedback for both positive and negative comments and try to correct our mistakes"</p> <p>"I guess but not really. I mean I see them, but I do not respond to them"</p> <p>"I use a page monitoring app and it alerts me anytime anything happens on any of our pages. I review the comments and immediately respond to them"</p> <p>"Yelp and Trip Advisor email me about the reviews that are posted for that day"</p> <p>"I mean you have to do what you have to do. Like monitoring other businesses. It is sad if restaurants spend a lot of time looking at their competitors. A cookie cutter does not work"</p> <p>"We look at what they are doing just to monitor what is going on with our competitors SNS"</p>
<p>Assessing defined as analyzing social media to make decisions about how and when to respond if at all</p>	<p>"Yelp and Trip Advisor email me about the reviews that are posted for that day. Whether or not it is a positive or negative review I will send them to the manager of the restaurant that it was directed at"</p> <p>"Some comments may be crazy but it is only through constructive criticism, then I can be better"</p> <p>"We look for positive comments because we want to reward a happy guest about telling friends"</p>
<p>Responding – defined as responding (after assessing how, when, to what posts) to the information generated through monitoring</p>	<p>"I review the comments and immediately respond to them. I respond to every single review and comment. This way I am showing my interaction with customers. It shows that you care about with the customer thinks"</p> <p>"I don't respond to everything but I respond to negative comments"</p> <p>"Positive reviews help the restaurants to know what they are doing well. Negative reviews help the restaurant to improve. For example if someone complains about an item on the menu they did not like, the chefs will take a second look and see if that item needs changing"</p> <p>"Just to apologize or if there is a discrepancy in the issue try to explain. Always thank people when they say nice things"</p> <p>"Consider the 3 A's"</p> <p>"It is important to apologize and then write back to them and invite them to give the restaurant a second chance. My protocol is to thank them for their input and taking the time to write about their concerns. Then, they say that they are aware of the situation and apologize. Lastly, we invite them back for a second chance"</p> <p>"Sometimes I will send out private messages, but only if the person who started the conversation messages her privately. I will always respond the same way the original person communicated to her"</p> <p>"We always respond privately, if we respond at all"</p>

Table III Categories of posts

<i>Category</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Totals</i>	<i>(%)</i>
Call to action	Prompt to come in, visit the restaurant	143	19.5
Food/drinks/products	Description of food/drinks/products offered	98	13.4
Restaurant events	Description/invitation to restaurant events	82	11.2
Holidays	Invitations to celebrate holidays together	66	9.0
Deals/discounts/happy hour	Descriptions of deals/discounts/happy hours	52	7.1
Local events/news/history/cross-pollination	Descriptions of local events/news/history/cross-pollination of advertising between restaurants	48	6.5
Specials and signature food	Description of specials and signature food	40	5.4
Appeals to consumers' lives/interests	Talking about consumer lives and things that might interest them	35	4.8
Asking questions	Raising questions	34	4.6
Restaurant news/story	Description of what is happening in the restaurant and/or the restaurant story	25	3.4
Menu/basic info	Basic information about the restaurant (location, menu, etc.)	23	3.1
Social issues/causes	References to local issues and causes	21	2.9
Humor	Using humor	20	2.7
Videos	Using videos	10	1.4
Outside contests	Description of outside contests	9	1.2
Restaurant contests	Description of restaurant contests	8	1.1
Awards/reviews	Description of restaurant awards and positive reviews of the restaurant	7	1.0
Call to action directed at friends	Calls to action directed at others such as contacting friends to let them know about the restaurant	5	0.7
Response to customers	Replying to posts	5	0.7
Recruiting employees	Recruitment of employees	3	0.4
Total		734	100

restaurant and restaurant contests. Interactivity was hardly present with very few posts asking questions, asking customers to contact other customers or responding to consumers.

The most common posts on social media encompassed calls to action that encourage the consumer to come to the restaurant. Common examples were like what one restaurant posted on Facebook, “[we are] sporting a new look! Be sure to come in and enjoy our new dining room. Back to regular hours, 8:00 Thursday morning.” By describing a new décor, the restaurant can transition into encouraging its Facebook followers to “come in and enjoy.” Other call to action posts were less explicit, such as when one restaurant used both Facebook and Twitter to post, “Bring on summer nights on Broadway!” accompanying a picture of its outdoor seating on a beautiful summer evening. Food and/or product postings were unsurprisingly the second most-prevalent post type. Food posts ranged from largely risk-averse, such as commenting “Bacon-wrapped filet is on the menu tonight!” to more creative like “Begin pre-meal happy dance” with a photo of pancakes. Restaurant events and holidays both seemed to provide ways for restaurants to find inspiration to post to and reach out to consumers. One restaurant used the Mother’s Day holiday to continue its commitment to branding itself with its signature food – the doughboy. The restaurant used Facebook to post, “TAG a MOM that deserves a [restaurant’s signature food] this weekend,” using a holiday to both continue marketing its signature product as well as prompt consumer to consumer interaction. Restaurants used their own events as means to further local involvement, such as when posting, “we are hosting a book signing tonight from 5-7p.m. in (town) with John T. Sullivan Jr.” Deals, discounts and happy hours represented the fifth most-common post type. One restaurant shared its “Tuesday Takeout Special” on Facebook every Tuesday, which includes a large two-person Chicken Parmesan meal for only US\$19.99 every week. However, it repeated the post every week, which created a repetitive aura, which may lessen its effectiveness. Only one restaurant

posted about happy hours. Posts about employment, restaurant response, awards/reviews and restaurant contests were the least popular five means of expression. Recruiting employees, at least in the small restaurant social media realm, is largely untapped, as only three restaurants attempted to recruit new employees via social media. Furthermore, only four of the restaurants have LinkedIn pages, indicating minimal commitment to online recruitment. Restaurant response, posts about awards/reviews and restaurant contests were used sparingly, but were largely successful when used, generating large consumer response and “likes.” For example, one restaurant shared a photo from a customer thanking them for organizing “Kids Fun Run,” which demonstrates the restaurants commitment to the community and propensity to listen to customers. Another talked about how “this lady requested a grilled cheese with apple, brie and turkey on social media,” in response to which the restaurant made the grilled cheese, posted it on social media and the woman went into the restaurant to order the item. Restaurants also attempted to gain legitimacy and credibility by sharing local food awards. Lastly, rarely used restaurant contests, such as posting “LIKE for a chance to win 2 FREE [SIGNATURE FOOD],” led to over 300 followers liking the post, in anticipation of winning US\$7 in total value.

On Yelp and TripAdvisor, most of the restaurants posted basic information, such as menu items, location, photos, etc., even though for Yelp, there is the option to promote more personalization, with the “from the business” page option. Only one restaurant effectively created a story around their restaurant’s roots.

4.2 Monitoring

The interviews show that the restaurants in this study used monitoring to varying degrees. Of the 14 interviewed restaurants, 13 monitored their consumers, and only eight monitored competitors on social media and review sites. Many of these restaurants used alert systems on social media to signal when a consumer commented. Some did so with less devotion and time, while others did so for a couple hours a day “because it is important to know the consumers’ thoughts and comments are being taken seriously.” In contrast, the few restaurants that did monitor competitors frequently did so with less enthusiasm than when targeting their consumers. The firms that chose not to monitor competitors centralized around themes, such as not letting “what other people are doing affect your own business.” Even the firms that *did* monitor were largely skeptical with one firm mentioning how it monitors competitors “a little bit but not necessarily does it steer our social media”.

Almost all the restaurants discuss how information gained on Yelp and TripAdvisor is instrumental in guiding consumer restaurant decisions. As one interviewee commented, he has his social media advisory company “check Yelp and Trip Advisor because those are the most important considering that we are in an area that is mostly tourism.” If social media such as Facebook and Twitter have rapidly changed marketing by shifting power from the marketer to the consumer, Yelp and TripAdvisor have continued that trend tenfold, as restaurants feel powerless and frustrated when reading reviews on the sites.

4.3 Assessing

From the interviews, we learn that only four restaurants use information they found on social media to modify their operations. About a quarter of restaurants monitor consumers to see what they say; five restaurants use it to find who the customers are and two want to see what customers are looking for. Nine restaurants monitor to address customer problems, and half of them hope to bring them back with incentives; a quarter of the interviewed restaurants look for praises to later thank their online advocates. Only four assess the information to make in house changes. Half of the restaurants that monitor competition do it primarily to become more aware of the competitive environment, and only two do it to learn

from them, one monitors competition to improve and another does so to differentiate themselves from competitors.

4.4 Responding

Responding involves taking actions directed at the consumers or at the restaurant itself. The content analysis of the interviews shows that most restaurants take actions mostly directed at responding to customers. About three-quarters of the restaurants state that they reply to negative comments and about a half of the restaurants say that they tend to respond to positive comments. Two restaurants do not reply to any customer comments.

4.4.1 Rules and procedures. Even though 11 restaurants talk about having procedures that would guide them on how to reply to consumers, these procedures are informal and unstructured. Two restaurants follow a “3A” rule. First, they thank customers for their input and *acknowledge* the issue, then they *apologize* for what happened and finally, they *approach* the customer by inviting them back with gift cards, drinks or a free meal. Another restaurant goes to great lengths to remedy the situation by tracking the customers down and calling them with apologies and offering compensation. This presents some issues concerning the privacy of the customer. Most follow loosely defined best practices they developed and use one or two steps in the 3A rule. For example, one restaurant apologizes but rarely admits any fault. Ten restaurants simply apologize, and five offer incentives to come back. Two restaurants offer simple solutions to help the customer prevent undesired experiences in the future. For example, one restaurant suggested seating customers far away from a band when a customer complained about loud music on a night that they had a live band. Another two wanted to explain their side of the issue. When faced with negativity, responding in constructive and professional ways to quickly remedy the situation is what most restaurants attempt to do. All the respondents expressed great stress over responding online in fear of escalating the situation. Restaurants reply using “neutral,” “light-hearted” and “casual” tones and try to sound positive. They want to “keep it (the comments) simple” and “kill them (customers) with kindness”.

4.4.2 Private and/or public. Deciding whether to respond in public or private is also important. Out of those who reply to customers’ comments, we found that two restaurants respond mainly in private, three always reply publicly and for seven restaurants, it depends on the type of customer comments and the ways they were approached. Those who reply publicly do so to demonstrate that they are transparent and “have nothing to hide.” They also want to show that they resolved the issue and made the customer happy. Those who respond only in private believe that consumers’ comments are a private matter and need to be discussed in a private setting. Most restaurants utilize both approaches depending on the situation. They may respond publicly only when they are being unfairly “bashed” or to “explain the situation” or when they address the harshest reviews. One restaurant sends a generic public message and asks the customer to continue the conversation in private. Three restaurants reply in the same manner they were approached by customers. Two restaurants reply to serious problems in private but address minor complaints in public to show that they listen and take the opinions of their customers seriously. Two restaurants in private conversations tried to persuade consumers to amend their public negative reviews, although they said that this happens rarely. Almost half of the restaurants admitted to censoring online posts at some point.

4.4.3 External and internal changes. Restaurants that utilize social media effectively, upon assessment, may decide to respond to comments by changing some aspects of their internal operations. Only four restaurants investigated the issues internally and only two made in-house corrections. One example is when a restaurateur discussed how “if someone complains about an item on the menu they did not like, the chefs will take a second look and see if that item needs changing.” Three restaurants at some point discussed customer postings with their employees, and one praised their employee for

good reviews. Another instance of a restaurant taking advantage of social media, in improving its in-house appeal, is a restaurant that monitored its competitive environment and noticed that avocados were gaining popularity, leading to them buying more and introducing new avocado-based menu items.

Restaurants feel powerless and frustrated about review sites, and as a result, few respond to comments placed there. One representative said, "You can't prevent [bad behavior] on Yelp. You cannot prevent that on the user end," while another interviewee described how "both the owner and myself get extremely frustrated with the feedback we receive on Yelp, so we really do not check it anymore." Only one responded with much frequency; perhaps, restaurants just do not find it to be worth the hassle. Many of the restaurateurs worry that responding may lead to online fights and worsened scenarios.

4.5 Strategic focus

The interviews provide context into how the restaurants approach social media and their overall strategies in crafting social media marketing. On a basic level, every restaurant displayed defender tendencies; one restaurant employee, for example, described how basic information is most important by saying "people look at hours, directions and menu." Most restaurants focused on building awareness online and traffic in the restaurant rather than encouraging interactivity (which is described in greater detail in the next section). Several restaurants talked about social media as a substitute for advertising and were aiming to save money on promoting their establishment with its use. Their focus was projecting information at consumers. Even when social media and review sites of customers were monitored, most felt great tension when assessing information online and were frustrated with negativity when posted by customers. In a clear majority of restaurants, social media management was centralized in the hands of the manager or owner of the restaurant, who, in a few cases, took suggestions from others, but mostly managed social media on their own. They are rather risk-averse, worry about unintentionally antagonizing their customers when posting or responding to posts, which stifles their interactions online. Most had business knowledge, and only a few had sufficient interpretive skills (using analytics online) or information technology (IT) knowledge, which impaired their online activity.

Explorers were much rarer; only three in the study vacillated successfully between defender and explorer actions among the seven that tried to be more prone to risk. One explorer discussed how his restaurant gets more responses and engagement from social media than the posters he puts around town, largely because of his "ability to reach and listen to [his] customers." This restaurant created a dish a customer recommended and invited her to try it. Others posted questions and tried to engage customers in a conversation. One demonstrated a propensity for risk taking such as using "social media to recognize other businesses," giving "shout outs to other businesses about a good review" or talking about (a musical artist's) Dave Matthews' visit to a competing restaurant. While this risk may boost his/her competitor's clientele, it also furthers this restaurant's brand as trendy and community-oriented.

Restaurant owners, managers or spouses of owners independently managed social media and decided on its content. Chefs were only consulted by those who managed social media about the specials and new menu options. All this indicates hierarchical structures in small restaurants. Managers of social media were all rather stressed about posting online, especially when responding to negative posts. Most disliked review sites, especially Yelp, as they felt that they had no influence on what is posted there. They were no written or formal guidelines about how to manage social media; some informal rules were followed on how to respond to customers which suggests that small restaurants are rather anarchic.

5. Theoretical implications

The study contributes to the theory in several ways. We focus on the supplier side of social media for restaurants, a perspective lacking in the literature (Lee *et al.*, 2015). We also investigate social media management in small restaurants that receive less attention in prior research. Our study shows that our chosen theoretical framework for social media management helps to analyze social media operations in small restaurants, points to the strategic orientations applied in small restaurants and intricacies of each stage. The application of the model to small restaurants helps to show what small restaurants do well and how they can improve their use of social media in their management, marketing and operations.

This study shows that small restaurants possess mostly features of conservative, hierarchical defenders that operate in anarchic ways. A small restaurant, like any business, should think of social media and its technology orientation as a continuous cycle, with constant changes and adaptations (Oronsky and Chathoth, 2007). To do so, it needs to establish its scope and culture, tailored to organizational capacities and the surrounding competitive environment (Felix *et al.*, 2017). This study finds that this is rarely happening in the context of small restaurants. Further, there needs to be an element of mindful adoption where managers consider who is responsible for managing social media, what rules need to be used, which information monitored and valued, how the value gained from and risks of using social should be assessed, measured (Culnan *et al.*, 2010) and finally used. Just establishing a social media presence to project information and monitor consumers for negativity, as it was the case for most restaurants, may not be enough to be successful online. There needs to be thought and conversation leading up to determining which social media will be utilized, for what purposes and how they be will be used (Culnan *et al.*, 2010; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Malthouse *et al.*, 2013). Here too, small restaurants are struggling.

In the first messaging/projecting stage, we find the majority of restaurants were using social media as a megaphone to “shout” out their messages to customers by projecting information about their products, sales promotions and their establishment (Gallaughier and Ransbotham, 2010) or pushing content on potential customers (Felix *et al.*, 2017) without much guidance or procedures. The variety of social media platforms the restaurants used and the diversity of their messages was limited, although, as literature argues, it is very important (Pham and Gammoh, 2015). However, many posts were calls to action, providing reasons for consumers to visit the restaurant that went beyond simply listing or advertising information about the restaurant such as hours, location and specials. Using social media to generate in-store traffic received limited attention in past studies, but this messaging is important as it may directly impact sales. Some restaurants also projected information about local events and social issues projecting an image of social responsibility. This suggests that perhaps even firms that have mostly defender tendencies have evolved in their understanding of social media even if they are not ready to completely embrace the collaborative nature of social media that explorers recognize. They seem to understand that social media messages need to be different from traditional advertising messages but have not yet figured out how to change their approach (Kwok and Yu, 2013). Alternatively, they may want to bypass the relationship building stage and jump to generating traffic into the restaurant. The definition of defenders as one end of a continuum related to marketing scope in Felix *et al.* (2017) framework perhaps could be updated to incorporate the concept that social media can be used to encourage in-store traffic in addition to generating customer engagement, relationship or awareness.

However, even though many posts in our study encouraged customers to act, most restaurants did not appear to use social media for participating, sharing and collaborating, objectives that social media is especially praised for (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). There were only a few restaurants that were using social media as a “magnet,” an objective that,

literature argues, may encourage firm to customer dialogue (Gallaughar and Ransbotham, 2010). Additionally, most restaurants did not strive to foster collaboration between themselves and customers and the community and, therefore, most would not be considered explorers (Felix *et al.*, 2017). Most managers did not appear to appreciate the relationship between online interactions with customers and their brand image and performance, a feature that makes social media so valuable (Pantelidis, 2010).

Pentina and Koh's (2012) taxonomy may be an alternative to understanding the marketing scope in the context of small restaurants. Using their taxonomy, most small restaurants could be categorized as calculative pragmatists who are trying to cut advertising expenses by driving traffic to the restaurants with calls to action on their social media. As calculative pragmatists, they also use social media to spread marketing information about their offerings but adopt a follower's approach learning from others and using tactics that others tested. Our study extends research by Pentina and Koh (2012) who clustered business-to-business (B2B) manufacturers, consumer and business service providers, distributors, retailers (with a majority of the sample having at least one million in sales businesses) into calculative pragmatists, cautious watchers and proactive strategists based on their approach toward the management of social media. Our study examined a different sample and showed that small restaurants exert features of calculative pragmatists, approach similar to retail stores as shown by Pentina and Koh (2012).

The study also shows that the descriptive content that small restaurants project is not limited to their products, services, sales promotions, restaurant events and their establishments to create awareness of the place. Some also talk about their local community, social causes and events, issues often unrelated to what the restaurant offers, and these trends are predicted to continue and strengthen in the future (Angus and Westbrook, 2019). Projecting social responsibility is a tactic that an increased number of companies adopt, and if applied in meaningful ways, it helps to build brand equity and differentiate a restaurant from its competition and especially from larger establishments. This may become more important in the context of small restaurants competing with larger chains, and given that consumers increasingly pay attention to social responsibility. More nuanced examination of the objectives of using social media in the future studies may better capture the spectrum of goals and orientations that businesses have when using social media, especially in the context of small businesses.

Few restaurants engage in all four stages of the social media management process, are strategic or consider it as a continuous process. Most places represent hierarchical structures governed in anarchic ways where social media is used mainly to create awareness about the restaurant, to bring customers to the establishment and to manage negativity. Those responsible for social media in our study did not seem to adequately act as curators of their actions and content, as they lacked policies dictating who should interact online, how often they should interact and when they should interact, how to monitor and use social media, which literature discussed as important in managing social media (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011). The findings of this study suggest that restaurants act as mostly conservative defenders in their entire process of social media management with few explorers who have creative ideas, interact, monitor, assess and respond to social media. Modern explorers promote dynamic and flexible approach toward social media, monitoring and using data from customers and competition in creative ways in contrast to conservative defenders who collect data for internal uses mostly (Felix *et al.*, 2017). Scant posts asked the customers to engage with their friends and, therefore, these restaurants were not encouraging customer-to-customer dialogue (Gallaughar and Ransbotham, 2010). While most of the restaurants fail to engage in the entire process of social media management, a few ventured into "explorer" territory, focusing not only on building awareness, but also on fostering interactivity with consumers and among consumers. These explorers not only try to interact with customers, but also attempt to monitor their consumers and competitors to

narrowly tailor their social media presence with informational richness in innovative ways. While several restaurants assess information that they gather from social media, very few follow up with action, learn from social media or alter their operations in response to information generated from social media, which is a missed opportunity for them, as social media provides them with valuable research (Pentina and Koh, 2012) that they otherwise may not have resources to generate.

However, our study also shows that some small restaurants do take risk and engage in all the steps of the social media management process. Future research may want to explore the underlining reasons for these differences, especially in the context of small restaurants, perhaps focusing on the most successful examples. For example, researching the impact of personality traits of the managers of social media such as uncertainty avoidance or social pressures they feel (perceptions that they should use social media because others use it or that everyone uses social media) in the context of small business may explain some of these differences. Our research showed that several managers of social media felt they do not have any direct competitors, or they believed that there was no reason to monitor competitors, a perception that affects learning from social media even though it is common practice for restaurants in other studies (Needles and Thompson, 2013). They also did not feel the need to have general guidelines for social media management, even though literature suggests that it is an effective practice (Culnan *et al.*, 2010). Anarchic systems of managing social media may not be beneficial in the long term, as increasing number of consumers will use social media. Pentina and Koh (2012) found that intentions to adopt technology are impacted by social influences, which include experts, competitors and customers influence intention to adopt a new technology, and these influences may determine the perceived usefulness of technology for small and medium businesses. Others talk about scarcity of resources as an obstacle (Lepkowska-White and Parsons, 2019; Lepkowska-White, 2017; Oronsky and Chathoth, 2007; Schaupp and Bélanger, 2013) or about the fears of interacting online that small restaurants face (Lepkowska-White, 2017) that may often be a result of lack of resources. Extending this research may help shed more light on how restaurants may better compete in the future as these more flexible, open, creative, mindful and synchronized approaches to social media management may not require significantly bigger resources, but a different approach to social media.

Future studies may also want to examine how social media can help small businesses better market themselves and compete with larger chains that have much more resources. Examining the strategies and approaches of successful small restaurants, interviewing their owners and examining their actual practices and strategic orientations may help restaurants that struggle. Studies may want to examine how businesses with different strategic focus (scope, culture, structure and governance) can use the framework tested in this study to foster awareness and interactions, monitor, assess and use valuable research to improve their internal and external operations. Here, researchers may want to apply this research to other small restaurants and businesses to broaden the scope, as we only analyzed the social media activity of 14 restaurants in the northeast region of the USA. Our study also looked at two months of data, and some restaurants only posted a few times during the time span. Future research may want to examine longer timespans, looking specifically for approaches that worked and/or backfired. Studies may want to apply this new model to compare tactics of small and large restaurants alike or small and big businesses in specific industries to see how these establishments use social media to successfully manage social media.

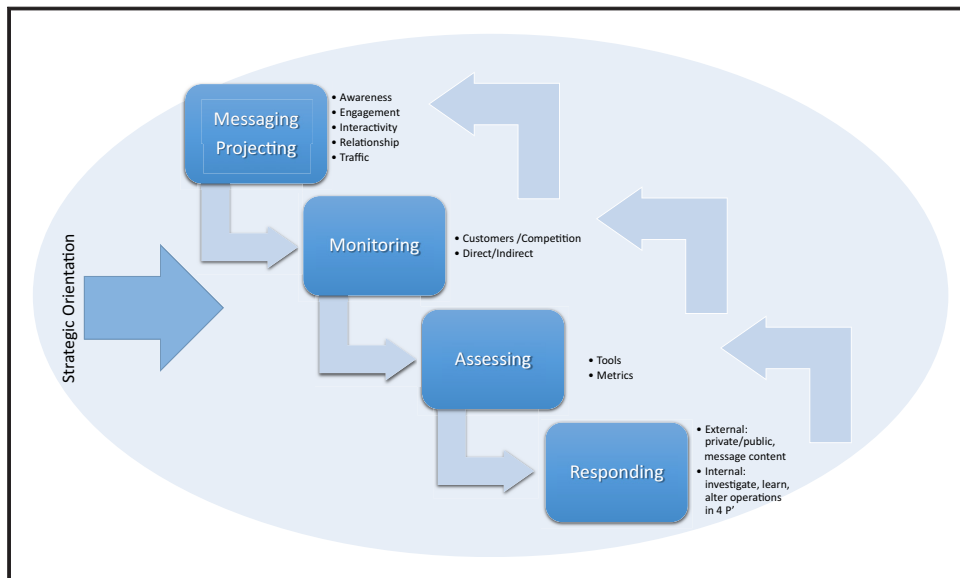
6. Practical implications

As customers continue shifting social media and review sites, more restaurants may want to invest in developing more creative approaches toward social media, but do it in more

structured, integrated and continuous ways. Figure 2 presents the process they may want to follow, and this paper offers some guidelines they may want to adopt. The figure shows that strategic orientation (scope, culture, structure and governance of the organization) guides management of social media in each stage and, therefore, social media should not just happen, but be clearly defined, as it drives tactical decisions in each stage. The first stage in this management process, messaging/projecting, may aim to build awareness, engagement and/or traffic by projecting messages and/or interacting with customers that may also foster interactions between people. In the second stage, monitoring, the organization needs to decide whether they will monitor customers and/or competitors and whether they will do it directly or indirectly. In the third stage, businesses assess the value of the information using predetermined tools and metrics, and in the fourth stage, they respond to social media. Here, they must decide whether to respond externally (to customers) or internally (within their business). If they respond externally, they should decide whether they will do it in private and/or public and then create a message content. If they respond internally, they may decide to investigate what happened and change their operations. They may, for example, punish or praise their employees, alter menus, change food section or alter their décor. Each of these stages may affect the other stages, especially in the more fluid types of organizations. For example, monitoring may affect the type of messages a restaurant projects at people if it is observed that customers respond to some messages and not to others.

Social media provides restaurants with the ability to create both awareness and interactivity, sometimes in the same post. Food posts are arguably the most important, as they describe what the restaurant's main objective is, namely, to create an anticipation of an enjoyable culinary experience. While these posts should be frequent, they need not be boring and only target awareness; explorers often find ways to present food in a creative, new and often funny manner. Creative posts such as the post with a picture of pancakes and the caption "begin pre-meal happy dance" can be an effective way for restaurants to use modern comedic trends of memes and comedic pictures to not only present food and products, but also arise emotional reactions from consumers. Comedy can often inspire consumer-to-business (C2B) communication and engagement, but should be used with caution. Restaurants may also continue using restaurant events as they promote awareness

Figure 2



and differentiation from competitors. Restaurant events provide easy ways for restaurants to find inspiration to post and reach out to consumers. One restaurant held and publicized a gardening event via social media, while another hosted a speaker at its restaurant. These events not only promote awareness, but also can allow a restaurant to brand itself as a firm that cares about consumers' lives and interests and wants to bring the community together. Community-oriented posts can often lead to engagement. Further, deals are one of the most important things customers care about, so restaurants may want to market deals frequently. Of course, with too many deals, quality perception could diminish.

Many restaurants in the study either failed to monitor competitors or only did so for general curiosity. Examining competitors' social media is a source of valuable research and can allow for inspiration, more knowledge of the competitive environment, differentiation and improvement. Restaurants may learn from their competitors what creative approaches work with the customers and use similar ideas on their sites. It appears that most small restaurants also neglect using social media as a means of improving their in-house operations, while primarily opting to respond to consumers, with most restaurants focusing largely on external response, and replying to consumer inquiries when they see fit. Even here, with little experience with social media, restaurants experience frustration and stress when faced with negativity. Explicit and specific guidelines on when and how to respond to comments may require some initial resources, but they will pay off long term. They may also help protect restaurants from possible legal threats and unintentional escalation of problems. Studies show that the presence of guidelines increases creativity, as people are better aware of what they can say online, which, in turn, could help restaurants in becoming more creative and engaging online (Felix *et al.*, 2017). Responding internally to insights gathered from social media can improve operations. It may, for example, help identify best employees who provide superior service and, therefore, should be acknowledged. Negative comments may help point to staff that need to improve. Comments on the food served may help structure future offerings.

As this study's data show, many of the restaurants that used both Facebook and Twitter shared the exact same information on both platforms. This neglect for mindful adoption likely originated with either lack of time and expertise or insufficient structural guidelines. Having the restaurant owner or manager autocratically manage social media, as was the case in this study, may lead to stale content, yet absolute freedom in who can post can create inconsistent tone and messages in posts (Felix *et al.*, 2017). Once a restaurant establishes who will create content and how it will generate content (from one or from many people), it needs to determine its propensity for risk-taking and plan its content on the continuum between being a defender and an explorer in a mindful way. Hopefully, the restaurant can then construct a valuable cycle of creating awareness and interactivity with its posts, and then constantly improve by monitoring consumers and competitors and assess and respond to this new information.

A small restaurant will likely not have substantial financial or time resources or capabilities to construct the best social media management strategy possible. As many of the interviewees discussed, some possess ideas they want to implement, but often do not have time or do not know how to implement them. Perhaps, restaurant owners/managers may ask advice from both consumers and employees to guide their posts and propose creative approaches. This way, there can still be a semblance of control, but this also lessens pressure on the owner to regularly come up with exciting new content. Certainly, these ideas will have to be filtered, and assessments will need to be made about which ideas can be used. Hiring interns versed in social media could alleviate costs, help generate fresh ideas and may demonstrate to the community that the restaurant helps local students to receive marketing experience. Restaurants may want to consider hiring a part-time social media manager, who can, at the least in the early stages, develop processes that the restaurant can follow in projecting/messaging, monitoring, assessing and using information

obtained online in a cyclical and continuous ways. In addition to saving money on marketing and market research, social media presents unique opportunities to engage customers and improve internal operations. Initial costs of training and developing procedures for using social media effectively may pay off when social media is implemented mindfully and with long-term focus consistent with the restaurant brand.

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